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Freedom

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INTEGRITY FIRST SERVICE BEFORE SELF EXCELLENCE IN ALL WE DO
THIS WE WILL DEFEND ***** HONOR COURAGE COMMITMENT
***** ALWAYS FAITHFUL ***** ALWAYS LEAD *****

Freedom

DEBORAH WORTHINGTON

Americans know about freedom. In school we learn how our forefathers fought and died so we can live in a free society. Yet few of us encounter freedom because its true nature is experienced only through its opposite. Even though my husband was a career Army soldier, freedom was still an abstract concept to me.

In August 1989, visiting colleagues stationed in West Berlin, we were enjoying an evening on the town—great schnitzel, a few glasses of Riesling, tales of past exploits swapped with longtime friends as we crammed into a Volkswagen bug to see the Berlin Wall after dark. Seconds after arriving at the massive concrete barrier, we stood mute; our gala laughter transformed into a requiem lament.

I walked to the nearest mobile viewing trestle and ascended the stairs to the observation platform twelve feet above the pavement. Across the expanse, light masts transformed evening into day; the glaring flood lights unable to camouflage the depth of inner darkness. From my elevated perch, I viewed the gradation known as 'no man's land', the 'dead zone' or 'death's strip'; all names apposite. The sole harvest of these harrowed rows of barren ground was despair, anguish and death. A swath of sand scrutinized for footprints and a chain of signal construction replete with trip wires and land mines prevented anyone from crossing undetected. Deep-set trenches alongside the strip of concrete road prohibited the further advance of patrolling vehicles. Emanating from this corridor of misery loomed the ubiquitous watchtowers dominating the horizon like malevolent sentries; turrets shielded snipers brandishing rifles aimed not in my direction, but searching for its fellow citizens.

The words from President John F. Kennedy's Berlin address echoed in my ears, "Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in..." I'd been a military wife for sixteen years and yet for the first time I understood why Bob's job was so important, why the sacrifice of military families was worth the cost. Freedom is fragile.

Berliners woke one morning in 1961 to find East German Troops surrounding West Berlin, blocking East Berliners from entering the western part of the city, while the concrete wall was constructed. Standing there in August, I had no idea that this barrier against basic human freedom and dignity that had symbolized tyranny for 28 years, would not survive much longer. The wall was breached November 9, 1989 and torn down bit by bit in the ensuing year, but our family has never forgotten its impact—obtaining freedom is long struggle but losing it takes only a moment. Our duty as Americans is to remain vigilant. To stand with the oppressed, wherever they may live, until the day all people are free.